

## Sermon for the Sunday of the Baptism of the Lord

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Grace Church in Scarborough

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### **"I love you, Dad." "I love you too, D."**

My father died in December 4 years ago. "He was a difficult man" is often how I describe him. He was prone to outbursts of violent temper. He had said harsh and cruel things to people close and far, to old and new friends and to neighbours and shopkeepers. He ended his life almost utterly friendless and alone.

He and I had gone through 3 years when he refused to acknowledge my existence and cut off all communication between me and him, and also with my mother. This was very hard.

Shortly before my mother's death I returned to England to see her, without letting him know of my plans. While I was sitting with her at her nursing home he and I met. It was tense. I suggested that he and I meet, put the past behind us and start again. A couple of days later he agreed to this meeting. We spent some hours in conversation, like two people feeling our way across dangerously thin ice. This was my last day in England and I had to make a flight out that night. When I got up to leave, as we went to the door of his apartment, there was a pause. I reached out to hug him. "I love you, Dad." I said. "I love you too, D." he replied. We held each other, having never done that before. Then I left.

"I love you, Dad." "I love you too, D."

That was the moment when it changed.

From then on we had a friendship. I cannot say it was an easy one, and in some ways a dishonest one, because I could never confront him for the things he had said and done to my sister and to my mother. But it was the only friendship I could make with him. Imperfect, limited, but also real for him and for me.

"I love you, Dad." "I love you too, D."

To be told that you are loved is a powerful and transformative thing to hear.

Not the soppy, beer-soaked "I love you man!" or the fleeting "Love you!" shouted at a departing car window.

To be told, in truth, in clarity, and to hear it, that you are loved is as life changing as meeting a Unicorn. More so.

Can you remember being told that you are loved in this way?

Can you remember the place?

Can you remember the day?

The smell in the air?

The feeling the next day?

The sense of weightlessness?

I remember a first passionate romance moment when my first-ever and new girlfriend held my hand during a chemistry class. Ah... it took my breath away!

I remember those moments, many, with Lucy, my wife. Some quite recent.

And I remember, not words, but the deep spiritual knowing, quite suddenly, a revelation, that I was loved by God. I was walking across the playing fields of a school in Durham where I was a student. I had been in a turmoil of discovering that Jesus was alive and knew me, and called me to give him my

life. But it was in walking in the dewy grass, early in the morning, heading to my room that I was suddenly caught up in the knowing that God loved me.

I was loved.

Loved without a reason

Loved in spite of failings, foolishness and all the other stuff of life.

I was loved because God wanted to love me. And my heart opened, right then, to love God too.

At the Bible study on Wednesday someone pointed out that Jesus got baptized along with a whole lot of other people. It was only when it was over that the voice and the dove came.

Perhaps this story matters because it is also the story of so many other Christians. You get baptized, or confirmed, or blessed by a bishop or whatever. Then, later, sometimes much later, the heavens open, and the spirit swirls in to you. A rush of wind and warmth and the knowing of God's love for you, of God's pleasure and delight in you...later it comes to you.

And why does it matter so much?

Why do lives change direction and purpose and community?

Because you hear your Father say "Child of mine! I love you. I am so pleased with you! I am delighted in you. *You....* just the way you are. I love you so much."

John warned people. "This guy doesn't do near death by drowning like I do. With me you come out wet and spluttering.

But his guy who is coming..... *he* will set your heart on fire. The spirit of God's love will sweep through you, and BAM everything will change in your life. Watch out! Keep your eyes open!"

We call this Sunday the Baptism of the Lord, like it was an event in Jesus' life. And so it was.

But it is also the Baptism which the Lord has for you. It is not of water, or of blessings from a priest or bishop. It is the Lord's to give.

It is the sudden, or the deep and gradual dawning of Love.

Of God's utter, unconditional and unstoppable love for you.

Not you in general, but you as Jesus deeply knows you.

"I love you, Dad." "I love you too, D."

These words brought healing, forgiveness, hope and new life to me and my Dad.

God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And it transforms lives.

Many people here know that love already. Others do not quite know it.

So I want to invite you to join me in a prayer as this sermon ends.

I will read it and invite you to repeat it, line by line, after me.

Holy God, open my heart,

Open my soul and my mind.

Tell me of your love for me.

Let me hear you speak my name.

Wash me in your spirit of love.

And hear me when I say to you,

I love you.

Amen.